



A Letter from within the Depths of Communist Russia
Parshas Vayechi

The letter received at the Lod post office in Israel was odd. All of the clerks were baffled, but one clerk looked and broad smile spread across his face.

It was addressed to “My brother Menashe Zeev.” For the clerk, my father in-law Rabbi Ber Rosenberg, that was enough information.

He had come to Israel after World War Two. He was a devout Jew and spent every spare minute studying. Once, someone entered the post office and asked if this was a study hall or a post office, as he saw him studying.

The stamp on the letter was of great interest to him – it was Russian. He knew who the letter was from and who it was meant for.

This is the story he shared with me:

It was during those years when the Soviets had an iron grip on the USSR. Rabbi Nosan Barkan was asked by the Lubavitcher Rebbe to travel to Georgia in the USSR to inquire about the Jews’ plight.

Rabbi Nosan traveled from his hometown of Riga, Latvia, to Georgia. He concealed his Jewish identity. During his stay there he shared with the local Jews the Rebbe’s concern and his request that they continue on with their battle to maintain their Judaism. They asked him to relay to the Rebbe their questions, and he promised to do so.

When he returned home he wished to update the Rebbe on his visit but could not do so because of the Soviets’ watchful eye and their obsessive tracking of any mail destined for the United States.

Rabbi Nosan waited until he traveled to Odessa, and from there sent the Rebbe the letter, via Lod, Israel.

In our weekly parsha we read about Yaacov’s blessings to his sons and grandsons before his death. “So he blessed them on that day, saying, “With you, Israel will bless, saying, ‘May G-d make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.’”¹ Rashi explains: “Whoever wishes to bless his sons, will bless them with their blessing (with a blessing related to them), and a man will say to his son, “May G-d make you like Ephraim and like Manashe.”

Why did his grandsons and not his sons merit such a blessing and status? A few verses before the blessing

Yaacov declares: “And now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt, until I came to you, to the land of Egypt they are mine. Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine like Reuven and Shimon.”² If they are like his sons, then why does Yaacov not have the generations bless their children that they become like Yaacov’s sons?

Yaacov teaches us here a great lesson. Yaacov’s sons grew up in his house, and so it is no wonder they grew up to be fine Jews. Yaacov’s grandchildren, on the other hand, grew up in Egypt and were forced to confront the Egyptian culture and idolatry in order to safeguard their Jewish identity. This is the real challenge.

This is what Yaacov told Yosef ““I had not expected to see your face, and behold, G-d has shown me your children as well.”³ It’s not that he had not expected to see him physically, but rather he was surprised by his righteousness, having preserved all that he had learned at home, and that he was successful in passing the beacon on to the next generation. Therefore, Yaacov praises them, and generations are blessed in their name. One blesses his children that they may have the ability to withstand even the most difficult challenges.

My father-in-law conclude his work day, and quickly walked to the home of Rabbi Efraim Wolf, his close friend and one of the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s confidants. He presented him with the letter and requested that he pass it on to the Rebbe.

“How did you know it was meant for me?” Rabbi Wolf wondered. “It’s simple. It’s a code – Menasheh actually means Ephraim, and Zeev in Yiddish for Wolf. It’s your name.”

Rabbi Nosan knew that he could trust my father-in-law to understand the code and pass the important message on to its intended recipient.

The letter was sent to the famed 770 Chabad headquarters, from which the Rebbe received a first-hand account on the lives of those fighting for their Judaism behind the Iron Curtain.

When the Curtain fell years later, those who fought prevailed, and emerged from behind the Curtain with their heritage and identity intact.

¹ Beresheit 48:20.

² Beresheit 48:5.

³ Beresheit 48:11.